

The New Jersey public library — A lifetime experience that keeps growing

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The library connects us with the insight and knowledge, painfully extracted from Nature, of the greatest minds that ever were, with the best teachers, drawn from the entire planet and from all our history, to instruct us without tiring, and to inspire us to make our own contribution to the collective knowledge of the human species. I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries.

— **Cosmos**

Carl Sagan

There are certain first time events from early childhood that remain an integral part of our lives forever. One such flashback in time came flooding back to me while preparing this column. My mind conjures a Saturday spring morning when I was seven years old. There is no mistaking the undeniable truth that the episode about to be told, occurred fifty long years ago, thus making me no longer young, while hopefully still retaining some relevance.

Memory dictates that on that particular day my father and I entered a small, cluttered building known as the Irvington Public Library. Located at 1064 Clinton Avenue, it was in close proximity to the business center of the largely blue-collar community. Irvington is a densely populated, 2.8 square mile urban town in Essex County, where I was raised and called home until my mid-twenties. On this otherwise nondescript early June day, I was about to become a bona fide, card-carrying member in one of our nation's first democratic institutions.

We were greeted inside by the friendly Library Director, an attentive woman, whose name I recall as Ms. McCloskey. To youthful eyes, she presented herself as an intelligent, older woman, who wore eyeglasses attached by a string of beads. I was taken by her exuberant speech and the obvious devotion to her profession. Standing alongside her was a much younger and taller woman with dark hair. Ms. McCloskey introduced this person to my father and me as her able assistant. I will refer to her as Ms. Helper, as her real name has been lost in time. Ms. McCloskey informed us that many years earlier, Ms. Helper had visited the Irvington Library on a personal crusade to improve her knowledge, by nurturing a new found appreciation for books. Reading, she said, was something Ms. Helper viewed much like a plague during her grade and early high school years. Under what the Director proudly described as her guidance, Ms. Helper developed a voracious appetite for reading as many 3 books on a variety of subjects in a single week. She said I too could achieve similar results simply by reading regularly. I could not believe there was any chance of my

completing such a daunting task. By the manner which Ms. McCloskey focused her eyes on me in the course of her impressive dissertation, it was evident there was a message to convey — books are to be enjoyed and treasured like special friends. I thought it odd that Ms. Helper contributed nothing herself to the Director's kind words, beyond appearing embarrassed by the conversation. The most she could muster was an occasional self-conscious smile in my direction. This went unnoticed by Ms. McCloskey, who continued to speak in glowing terms about her star pupil.



Truth be told, the drama of Ms. McCloskey's kindly lecture did not interest me half as much as my immediate intent for locating the one book I had hoped to find. Dad walked with me to the card catalog, opening the long wooden "Subject" drawer designated by letters MAG — MRN. I then took over, turning the index search cards quickly, flipping ahead until reaching MAN, then pay dirt — Mantle, Mickey — BIO. I immediately sought Ms. Helper for assistance. She escorted us to the Biography shelves, and within no time, I was firmly gripping my hard cover treasure perfectly encased in a plastic dust jacket: Mickey Mantle of the Yankees, by Gene Schoor.

The remaining hour or so was spent walking the many long aisles with my dad, intently listening to him point out a classic novel, a well-known author and certain subjects that might interest me, e.g.: the planets, mysteries, cowboys, trains and U.S. Presidents. I was clearly spent by the entire experience, more than likely exhausted from taking in the overwhelming volume of inventory, with names and titles that meant nothing to me — more books than I had seen in my lifetime. My father must have recognized the wilting signs in me. He announced it was time to leave. We made our way to the Circulation Desk where I obligingly handed Mickey over, along with my brand new library card to the Desk Librarian. She carefully applied her date stamp to a card that was fastened inside the rear book flap, signaling Mr. Yankee was mine to keep for an entire month. As we left for home in my Dad's 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air, I felt all was right in my world.

The Irvington Public Library of that early time has since taken up new quarters in an attractive, spacious building, erected in 1968 and located on Civic Square. But on that Saturday morning long ago, thanks to a baseball hero, an energetic Library Director and a loving parent, the wheels were set in motion for my initiation into the world of books. Beginning in 1789 when the first New Jersey public library opened its doors in Burlington N.J., variations on this experience have served to introduce children to a higher degree of learning.

Time has certainly altered the scope and physical appearance of the New Jersey public library. The process of evolution has brought about expansion and growth. The days of serving the public only as a book lending and reference collection institution has long since vanished. The card catalog demonstrates perhaps the most apropos example of what once was. The card filled drawers in wooden cabinets, a basic staple for generations of patrons, was arguably the most familiar site beyond book shelves themselves. They have literally been lost in the shuffle and effectively replaced by (OPAC), the Online Public Access Catalog. The few libraries that maintain card catalogs use them only as a secondary resource and they are seldom updated.

Today's libraries offer a wide spectrum of media beyond books and periodicals for children and adults, which includes DVDs, books on CDs, music CDs, E-books and video games. Through the advancement of online services, most libraries are also now offering free public computer, internet access and interlibrary loans. This has dramatically driven up attendance figures, especially in certain rural and urban areas of the state where people cannot always

afford home computers and utilize library searches to perform job searches and complete mandatory online employment applications.

The New Jersey State Library, based in Trenton, promotes and supports high quality library and information services to all the people of New Jersey. It subscribes to a large number of licensed data bases that are made available to every card holder in the state's 304 libraries. Depending on the available funding of their operating budget, some local libraries have purchased additional databases for their residents.

Ridgewood's Public Library Director, Nancy Greene considers today's public library both a community and education center. She reports 50,000 sign-ups per year for usage of its library computers. Besides its mainstream events, the Ridgewood library offers a diverse variety of cultural activities for its community residents. For example, volunteers from The Genealogical Society of Bergen County provide assistance for those wishing to trace their genealogy. The library offers a foreign film discussion group which is conducted by Ms. Greene.

The Newark Public Library is an active participant within the community. The library has seen an increase in attendance in the past year which is attributable in part to patrons using the computers to perform job searches in this difficult economy. Many employers will only accept online applications. The library also offers many programs which include free computer classes, outreach programs and ongoing exhibitions which encompass a variety of subjects and themes.

The current Irvington Library Director is Joan Whittaker. She advises the library provides a number of community programs which include musical concerts, movies and poetry readings. Free computer classes and assistance in performing job searches is provided. Reference Librarian, Daphne Bishop-Brown emphasized that library funding is a necessary ingredient needed to provide educational services. She stressed the need for local government to recognize the library's important role in the community at large when budget time comes around.

Reference Librarians Madeline Roese of Bernards Township and Louise Yan of Belleville believe that patron assistance remains a core component of every library. Ms. Roese used internet searches as an example, commenting that "some people are able to navigate successfully through a particular website until a certain point, but eventually they require hands on direction."



Library Director, Colleen Byrne of New Providence noted a "considerable increase in both attendance and circulation in 2009 from the previous year." Similar comments were provided by Directors Stephanie Burke of North Arlington, Kimberly Matthews of Trenton, Bob Belvin of New Brunswick and the aforementioned Nancy Greene and Joan Whittaker. Most cited these increases were due in part to the sluggish economy and less new books being purchased, online job searches, free internet access use and database downloads.

The increases are even more impressive considering 2008 produced even better results than in 2007. With attendance and circulation continuing to rise each year, it is especially good news given flat funding or decreases in funding have affected most New Jersey public libraries in recent years. Libraries are supported by tax monies from municipal and state governments. The major funding is based on Equalized Valuation, which equates to the equalized valuation of the municipality, as certified by the Director of the State Division of Taxation for the year preceding that in which the calculation of State aid is made. As real estate values increase, so will library funding and conversely, when prices go down, so does funding appropriation for libraries. Some have foundations to support them with additional capital. Libraries also receive funding from user generated fees by charging fines for overdue, lost or damaged books.

The New Jersey State Library collects statistical data and surveys from the public libraries throughout the state. This information can be reviewed on their extensive website at www.njstatelib.org. The local libraries will report their individual 2009 results in March and April. The State Library compiles these findings for release in its official report expected in May 2010. The results are expected to be very positive, similar to the findings in the informal polling. According to State Library Analyst Trend Specialist, Alka Bhatnagar, the 2008 results verified an average increase in attendance of 5% from the prior year. During this same calendar year, circulation increased by 7%. The most dramatic, but not surprising increase from 2007 was a 15% increase in free usage of the library's personal computers. Funding increased for only a few libraries in 2008 while basically remaining flat or experiencing slight decreases. On average, state aid accounts for only 1% of funding with 95% being received from municipalities. Ms. Bhatnager opines that when the 2009 statistics are tabulated, the results will show the upward trend in attendance, circulation and computer usage has continued with even higher percentage increases across the board than in 2008.

Nancy Dowd is the Marketing Director at the New Jersey State Library. She is an avid cheerleader for public libraries and with good reason, based upon recent statistics and future projections. Libraries are reinventing themselves by taking on more expansive roles. Ms. Dowd clearly envisions the public library serving as full-fledged community centers of the future. She considers the ongoing goal of the library to provide the community with the best possible programs and activities and will someday take on more expanded roles as senior centers, teen centers and even day care centers. The possibilities are abundant.

An epilogue to my youth and that very first library card is in order. There is no cause for concern about the future of books on our library shelves. Our cherished institution will not lose sight of books, nor of newspapers and magazines and their indelible role. There is no mistaking that they will remain with us forever, no matter what medium delivers the words. Books are at the core of our learning, research and education process and will continue as a library mainstay. There is magic in words. Reading is an active endeavor. It requires us to think, to explore and to use our imagination. Conversely, television is passive and promotes very little of the above. This has been aided, in part, by the remote control, a plastic comfort invention which the writer, Pete Hamill, considers as addictive as any drug to come along in the past century. It permits a flood of images, from hard core news stories about the earthquake tragedy in Haiti, to the secret life of Tiger Woods, to Viagra commercials and the latest American Idol to permeate our brain. If nothing grabs us, we simply CLICK-CLICK-CLICK and turn to something else. There is no time to process and interpret. These images amount to a seamless, visual blur that can distort the difference between truth and falsity, reality and entertainment. Books, however, do require effort on the part of the individual. They make us use our brain and promote learning. The British philosopher, Sir Francis Bacon, said it best, "knowledge is power."

We need only to be willing patrons at the friendly public library in our local town, borough or city to benefit. It's a special gift to all of us, courtesy of our cherished institution. It simply needs opening. The keys to learning through books and so much more can be found there — and they are offered for free.

(An informal poll of 14 New Jersey public libraries, across 10 counties, was conducted for this article.)